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### Paul Ricoeur on Mimesis: futurity in the distention of [architectural] intention

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**Forum for European Philosophy Event  
Thursday 20 March**

**Dorian Wiszniewski**

**Paul Ricoeur on Mimesis: futurity in the distention of [architectural]  
intention**

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**Introduction**

(Nov 2007)

It is a propensity within architectural and general cultural practice to sublimate (to reduce to unreality) or eliminate any account of the apparently interior (creative) processes to justify an architectural project only by the apparently exterior (legislative) processes that circumscribe architectural production. This favouring towards apparently exterior processes promotes two main characters of rhetoric. On one hand, there is the one dimensionality of technical-instrumental-economic rationale, that Marcuse finds so revolting, which demands architectural projects to be either explicit in their causal relations between ends and means or, seemingly, celebratory (fetishist) of technical-instrumental-economic means as ends in themselves. On the other hand, there is a deliberate silence about interior processes, romanticising them as utterly inexplicable gifts born of Genius and Grand Design, which is equal in force to technical-instrumental-economic rationale as disincentive both to those who feel not to be the beneficiaries of such apparently natural providence and those who do understand something of the substance and importance of these would-be interior processes but fear the difficult challenges set by the instrumentality of the world. This propensity towards exterior processes, ironically, but surely obviously, offers very little practical advice for effecting wonderful architectural/cultural circumstances. Furthermore, if one accepts these opening statements, it seems quite extraordinary that fussing about rules with such lack of skill in creativity and understanding is actually the motor that drives the legislative force and consequently much of the expression of what makes up the greater part of our cultivated and built environment. Given this, it is also obvious, then, that critical positions would and should emerge in response to this state of affairs. Furthermore, it might also be logical to expect, or at least hope, that these critical positions will, in due course, begin to effect some appropriate changes within the exterior processes that govern the generality and, therefore, the measure of liberty for the further development of cultural practices. The author of this paper remains hopeful.

This paper looks at one particular way of coming between the interior and exterior worlds of production. It takes its lead from the work of Paul Ricoeur<sup>1</sup>. The chapter, *Mimesis and Representation*, from *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, is itself a representation and summary of some principle concerns explored in his three volumes (in four parts) *Time and Narrative*, and poses particular questions of the interpretability of texts. Hermeneutics is as pertinent for architecture as it is for philosophy and other cultural studies. This may very well be, as Ricoeur suggests, the hermeneutical age of reason<sup>2</sup>. The opening paragraph above sets out the particular urgency that architecture brings to the questions of interpretation and representation. The fundamental premise that conditions this paper is in assuming a

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<sup>1</sup>Ricoeur, Paul. *Mimesis and Representation*, in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, edited by Mario J. Valdés. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.25.

logical parallel between the narratology of architecture and that of texts. Therefore, from the outset, it should be declared that where Ricoeur thinks *text* this paper thinks *architectural project*; where Ricoeur thinks *word language* this paper thinks *architectural language*; and where Ricoeur thinks *reader* this paper thinks *interested user* (the question of a disinterested user is also very important and always in mind but not one that is pursued directly here). However, the issue of authorship, ultimately, is the central line of questioning for this contribution to the *Provocations* seminar series: how does Ricoeur's work provide sustenance for a conception and practice of authorship that might otherwise be starved by the limited fecundity of instrumentality and, furthermore, that might operate autonomous to specific fields of interests, be they the persuasive forces of opposition or the disinterestedness of agnostics, yet which is still utterly committed to as full as practicably possible a participation in the culturally contingent symbolic networks that either completely circumscribe or significantly overlap with the specific cultural production that drives authorship in the first instance, in my case architecture? Or, to pose the same question using the terms of the specific text currently in focus, how to author in light of both the impasse to which the question of representation has been relegated and after the question of representation has been returned, via Ricoeur's triad of *mimesis*, to its field of play?

Therefore, as the title of this paper prompts, we should get to the heart of what concerns us about Mimesis through focussing on a few very specific aspects of Ricoeur's work. Both the full spectrum of Ricoeur's analysis and the two principle aspects that drive it can be gleaned from the following two quotations. At the beginning of book 1 he states, "The major antithesis around which my reflections will revolve . . . [:]two features are set in opposition to one another, features which the author, with his marked taste for sonorous antithesis, coins *intentio* and *distentio animi*."<sup>3</sup> From near the end of book three we can pull out a statement that qualifies the relationship between time and language, declared as the hypothesis that oriented the work from the very beginning; he states, "temporality cannot be spoken of in the direct discourse of phenomenology, but rather requires the mediation of the indirect discourse of narration."<sup>4</sup>

So it seems that narration, text, the architectural project, any cultural production, is a necessary artifice that mediates being-in-the-world, or temporality. Therefore, mindful of the futurity of Heidegger's *Dasien*, which is the basic character of projection that befits its temporality<sup>5</sup>, the question to be pursued here is what kind of text might be produced when we can call upon a deeper understanding of the phenomenology of time, or as Ricoeur suggests, the "aporetics of temporality"<sup>6</sup>, and with willingness to go along with the to-and-fro between distention and intention as it informs, orients and re-orientes representational exchange in the course of production?

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<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.241.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, Hans Georg, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans David E. Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, p.49

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans, Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.96